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Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our Universities: The Cost of Remediation

Third in the series *Follow the Money*

Any expert in efficiency will tell you the same thing: “Do it right the first time.” Doing it a second time costs twice as much.

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not.

Walter Bagehot (1826-77) **Physics and Politics**, 1879

Can't or won't pass English 101 or Algebra 101 in high school? No problem. The university will fix it.

Students are borrowing money to take courses which were available at no charge from their high school. Our universities are taking on remedial work that is not their business, and it costs them. More importantly, it hurts all students, not just the ones taking remedial classes. I will not blame secondary schools, primary schools or parents. Resources committed to remediation cannot be used to benefit students who have prepared themselves well for university study. Furthermore, remedial efforts are frequently for naught. U.S. Department of Education data for 2004 indicates that only 17% of the students who take remedial courses graduate.

In the 2007-2008 school year, it was estimated by The Alliance for Excellent Education that the cost of remediation was about \$3.6 billion nationally. Most students leaving high school with a Grade Point Average of 3.0 think they are prepared to begin university-level study. However, Jane V. Wellman, director of the Delta Project on Post Secondary Education, says 40% of them need at least one remedial course.

Often, universities take in unprepared, underperforming students in an effort to create cash flow, forcing students and exploited taxpayers to foot the bill for their misrepresentation of what it takes to succeed in study.

Lower-cost, lower-risk alternatives are available. The least expensive approach all around is for students to do well the first time in high school. On those occasions when a student needs remediation, he or she should have to pick up the whole tab with no loan money of any kind. The value of something increases when we have some skin in the game. Community colleges are ideal for this situation because their mission includes providing preparatory and introductory material efficiently and inexpensively.

All of this may sound cold-hearted. A second chance is a powerful, transforming opportunity, but not when it denies responsible students a first chance when they've shown themselves ready. Second chances should be given only when a student demonstrates a willingness to remake themselves.

What seems truly cold-hearted is encouraging a student to take out a loan for an asset that is statistically unlikely to materialize. Saying “You can!” when “You can’t,” or “You won’t” is pilfering aspiration. Universities owe students an honest appraisal of their potential. Sugarcoating their prospects, whether to spare their feelings or to secure the benefit of their loan awards payments, is unethical and lying by any other name.

For too many people, universities are turning into a decades long sentence to a debtor’s prison without walls - confinement of opportunity, the most debilitating form of incarceration in a free society.

Hard work is the stuff middle class lives are made of – hard knocks sometimes, too. Many immigrants are willing to separate themselves from family and friends to get a piece of the Jeffersonian dream. It’s too bad that this type of determination can’t be grafted onto assumptive students who have not recognized that the rewards earned through higher education require thoughtful and, at times, sacrificial choices. They are not gifts granted from above. They are the consequence of extraordinary effort, a responsibility to be coveted by an individual learner, not a right to be carved up for all.

Financial reality holds true in all institutions: universities, regional and liberal arts campuses and teachers’ colleges. Educating competent teachers is so important that the nation spent approximately \$130.5 billion in 2008 to achieve this goal according to *Philanthropic Investment in Teachers And Teaching*, by Kathleen deMarrais of the University of Georgia. To undermine that commitment is an irrational use of scarce resources. Likewise, educating professionals in STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) consumes about \$3.5 billion from the budget of the National Science Foundation, Department of Education, and the Department of Defense according to *A Report from the Federal Inventory of STEM Education Fast-Track Action Committee*, December, 2011. The money spent on remediation could increase resources available to invest in such projects.

When compared to the total investment in universities, remedial coursework is modest, a few billion dollars. However, education dollars are becoming an ever scarcer resource. Remediation spends the time, energy, and talent of students and faculty who could be making better use of all three.

Resources should be directed into investments where they will pay the greatest dividends, not do-overs. The hidden costs to students, universities and our nation of dashed dreams, debt, discouragement and disdain for education are without known bounds.

Our universities need to follow the roadmap of money to functional fidelity, not to a fool’s paradise.